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Dark Shadows

By August and Cynthia Hahn

No matter how safe or smooth a traveled path might be, it is always harder to walk it alone. When the road is a difficult one, fraught with peril and painful choices every step of the way, it can be impossible to travel without help. For those stranded on such a journey, finding the strength to go on can be an arduous task; it is easy to feel lost, forsaken, or even doomed to whatever darkness lies ahead.

At times like these, only the love and support of others can see one through. Salvation comes not from inner strength but from the faith of friends and the realization that regardless of the dangers along the way, a burden shared is a burden lightened.

He looked over the datapad one last time, just to be sure. The coordinates came back from his navigational computer, confirming the destination spelled out in his briefing. He wanted it to be a mistake, but there was no denying the truth. These were his orders, straight from the Office of the Supreme Chancellor himself.

Though the war was technically under the command of the Jedi Council on Coruscant, missions were coming out of the Chancellor's office with increasing frequency. Darrus Jeht would have questioned such a turn of events if the Chancellor's directives had not always been so accurate and effective. Palpatine had a good mind for war, it seemed, and his insight was proving invaluable.

Still, this new mission was... dangerous. No, more than that - - it was completely unorthodox. The target planet was not a military base or garrison, but a mining and resource world deep in the heart of Secessionist territory. Corlax 4 had a population of more than 300 million, all laborers and their families.

The mission commands were very clear. Penetrate the system's defense fleet, bombard Corlax 4, and destroy its orbital processing facilities. Then, if enough firepower remained after the planet's scouring, destroy the defense fleet and leave nothing alive in the entire system. It was intended as a message to Count Dooku and his allies: The Republic will destroy your means of waging war until you no longer can.

Jeht understood its intent, but he also saw its implications. It was another war crime and this time, he would have to do it intentionally - - kill 300 million civilians doing nothing worse than trying to earn a living in a galaxy torn apart by war. The Chancellor's reasons for this strike were logical, and Jeht knew why it had to happen, but that didn't make the death of

another planet full of innocents any easier.

He dropped the datapad in its recharger and looked around the bridge. It was late in the shift rotations, and only one other officer was present. With a deep sigh, he gave the command. "Helmsman, set course for the Corlax system. Plot a trajectory that takes us as far outside Secessionist patrols as possible."

The navigation officer snapped to attention and started working over his controls. "Right away, sir!"

Darrus closed his eyes and tried not to remember what he was certain to recall -- the feeling of all those souls on Kromol, wiped out by his hand. The pain of their deaths was still with him, lying in wait to ambush him. He had stopped sleeping; the nightmares were too vivid, too intense. Instead, Force meditation sufficed to keep him going. It was not as good as real rest, but he wasn't going to be getting any of that any time soon.

With an off-handed statement to the nav officer about keeping things on course, he stepped off the bridge and into his private conference room. A small chamber paneled in orbital steel, it had only a small table, a communications screen, and four chairs. More exhausted than he cared to admit, Darrus slumped into one of them and laid his head down on his arms.

Meditation or not, sleep found him there. No sooner was he unconscious than the events of the terrible night flooded back into his mind. He saw the dark ship lifting off the planet's surface, relieved giving the order to fire all weapons, and watched helplessly as the vessel detonated and sent shockwaves across Kromol's surface. More than a billion dead, roasted alive by protonic fire or suffocated as their world's atmosphere boiled away. All his fault.

All his fault...

He lurched up out of his night terror, roused not by its horror but by an insistent buzz on the table's comm array. Regaining his senses, the Jedi tapped the accept button. "Yes? What is it?"

"Sir, there's an incoming transmission, coded with an inscription key."

He shook his head, trying to clear it. "What's the key, trooper?"

The clone soldier replied, "Untaire, sir. Just the one word. Vocal patterns show that you have to speak it or the signal will not decrypt."

Darrus allowed himself a small smile. He hadn't heard from Trilinae in weeks, now going on months, and he missed her a great deal. "Send it in here, trooper, and engage privacy mode on the conference room."

"Right away, sir."

He leaned back, running one hand through his long black hair in a vain attempt to look more presentable. When the array showed a queued signal, he spoke Tril's last name, Untaire, and the transmission unlocked. On the screen, a familiar face appeared. It was such a welcome sight, Darrus almost slumped

again just from relief.

"Tril, it's so good to - - "

The Coreellian woman shook her head and frowned. "Wrong twin, dark eyes. It's Milinae, and you look like the south end of a Gundark."

Darrus looked down, sighing to himself. He adored Mil, but she wasn't who he wanted to talk to right now. More than anything, he needed to hear Trilinae's voice and talk to her about everything that was happening. She just had a way of putting everything in perspective.

"Hello? Dar? You asleep on me?"

He sat up straight, obviously more exhausted than he'd thought. "Sorry, Mil. What do you need, and why are you comming me on an encrypted signal?"

The pretty smuggler rolled her eyes. "You don't get out much, do you? Cularin's gone independent, and you're the Captain of a Republic battle cruiser. If I used an open comm signal, it would be intercepted for 'security reasons'."

Darrus nodded. "Of course it would, and it probably should. My work out here is very sensitive, Mil. We can't afford to have security compromised in any way."

With typical Untaire loathing for authority, Milinae stuck out her tongue. "Blah blah blah, whatever. Look, dark eyes, I'm comming you because one, you always get yourself into trouble when you're this quiet for this long, and two..." She paused, obviously worried. "Trill's missing."

Suddenly, Darrus Jeht was completely awake. "What? How? When?"

"Calm down, Jedi." She flashed him a teasing smile. "Can't have you going all dark on us, now. Look, she was flying back to Cularin when her ship got caught by some, um, friends of ours." She waved her hand dismissively. "Don't worry. She dusted them all, but her ship got shot up in the process."

Darrus was not calmed in the slightest. "Is she hurt?" He was already plotting courses in his mind to the Cularin system. At this ship's fastest speed, he could get there in...

Milinae shrugged. "I don't think so. Your bodyguard squad was there to pull her out of the ship, but now they've all gone missing. Mar'ek, sis, their whole fragging shuttle." Mil made a little pout, an expression he would find adorable under any other circumstances. "Even R-0 can't find them."

Jeht immediately relaxed. "Not to worry then, Mil. I'm tracking the shuttle. They made contact yesterday, and they're on their way to rendezvous with me now." He punched the ship's bridge intercom button and gave orders to belay heading to the Corlax system. "We can wait for them here before heading out."

Milinae nodded. "Well, that's good. I've got something else to ask, Jeht, if you'll listen."

He was a little alarmed at how conspiratorial her tone had become. "You know I'll always hear you out, Mil."

She looked down, then to her left as if listening to someone else he couldn't see. After a few moments, she turned back to the comm. "Darrus, there's a lot going on here on Cularin. We could really use some help, and the Republic's pulled out. Smugglers - - not the good kind, like me - - are making life hard on everyone, and something..."

She trailed off, as if hesitant to talk about what was really worrying her. He waited for almost a minute before breaking the silence. "Mil, what is it?"

She took a deep breath. "It's Almas, Jeht. Almas is - - gone. Everyone there is dead, Darrus. I'm... I'm sorry to be the one to tell you."

He stared at the screen for a moment. His last mission had come as he was en route to Almas to get some answers about his past. He'd chosen to do his duty to the Council. Because of that, he wasn't there when they needed him most.

"Darrus, are you all right?"

He stood up, his tone cold and steady. "No, Mil. I'm not. But I will be. I'll be there as soon as I can." With that, before she could even answer, he switched off the comm and strode purposefully out of the room.

"Helmsman, scrap the last course. I want an intercept course for the Maelstrom's shuttle laid in and engaged immediately. Once we've picked them up, best possible speed to the Cularin system."

The navigator looked up at him curiously. "Cularin, sir? But that system is not a Repub - - " He stopped speaking as Darrus' black eyes fixed on him with a glimmer of quiet hostility.

"Was my order unclear, trooper?"

"No, sir! Intercept course right away, sir!"

Darrus sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of his face. He was breaking his orders now, something the Chancellor would probably take as a personal offense. He would have to apologize later, if he was given the chance. Some things were just more important. He had to make a stand somewhere, make a choice.

If he had to choose between protecting his home and murdering civilians, he knew where his loyalties rested. For the first time in his life, Darrus Jeht had to disobey.

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Four hours later, on the bridge of the Squall, the Maelstrom's combat shuttle, the ARC Trooper Mar'ek and his second in command took a private communication of their own. From a small holoprojector clutched in Mar'ek's

armored right hand, a hooded figure glowed in cascades of blue light.

"The time has come. Execute Order 66." That was all the figure had to say, though the ARC Trooper thought he detected a certain hesitation, even regret, in the man's voice. Regardless, the word had been given. There was no turning back now.